

Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, December 13
Isaiah 12:2-6; Luke 3:7-18



First United
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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Gaudete . . . rejoice! “*Gaudete in Domino semper*” is the beginning of the Latin Mass on this Third Sunday of Advent. “Rejoice in the Lord always!” which is the 4th verse in Chapter 4 of Paul’s letter to the Christians in Philippi, the text that lies behind the words of our Community Prayer this morning.

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 4:4-7) In anticipation of Jesus’ birth and joy coming into the world in the person of an infant, we light the pink candle of the Advent wreath. It is not all brow-furrowing darkness in the world; there is light coming which brings us joy.

Not necessarily happiness. Joy and happiness are not the same. Happiness is transient, dependent on the circumstances of the moment. Joy is deep and abiding, says Paul, because God is near; the birth of Jesus dramatizes that. Of course, we know from the Old Testament that Jesus has not been the only sign that God is near. The prophet Zephaniah urged the Israelites to rejoice and exult because he saw that the Lord God was in their midst and was leading them home from exile. “Do not fear,” he proclaims to the people of faith.

That is the same message we heard from another prophet a moment ago. Isaiah, Chapter 12: “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid.” And then, Paul, several centuries later picking up on the same theme for a newly developing community of faith, writes, “The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything. Rejoice and let your gentleness be known to everyone.”

But then, what did they know . . . Zephaniah, Isaiah, and Paul? They lived a long time ago, far away. They did not read the headlines we have read, heard the public exhortations that we have heard, seen the FBI process 185,000 gun purchase background checks in a single day, the day after Thanksgiving. And those are just the legal purchases. What better way to say “thanks” to God than buying a gun, or two, or three? Somehow we are to address fear with gentleness? Come on, Paul; you can get crucified for that; you already have seen it once, and you are about to see it again, up close and personal.

Fear . . . it appears to be good for business; it appears to be good for politics.

Marilynne Robinson is a well-known author – *Housekeeping*, *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*; those are her novels. She also has written several essays. She is a Christian, and she draws on it in this exchange in an interview last month in *The New York Review of Books*. The interviewer (Barack Obama) identifies two extremes of Christian self-interpretation in our country, the “us-versus-them” position and the “wishy-washy . . . anything goes” idea. Focusing on the first extreme he asks Marilynne Robinson, How is it that “folks who take religion the most seriously sometimes are also those who are suspicious of those not like them?”

She responds, “I do not know how seriously they do take their Christianity, because if you take something seriously, you’re ready to encounter difficulty, run the risk. When people turn in on themselves, and God knows, arming themselves against the imagined other, they’re not taking their Christianity seriously. . . . Christianity is profoundly counterintuitive – ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself’ – which I think properly understood means your neighbor is as worthy of love as you are, not that you’re actually going to be capable of this sort of superhuman feat. But you’re supposed to run against the grain. It’s supposed to be difficult. It’s supposed to be a challenge.” (President Obama and Marilynne Robinson; “A Conversation in Iowa,” 11/5/15)

It is not easy being a Christian; it is hard being gentle. And there is not much that is gentle about John the Baptist’s proclamation to the crowds in the wilderness. “You brood of vipers, who warned you to scurry for cover?” How is that for the opening line of a sermon? “You need to repent and turn away from the things you have been doing. Do not tell me, ‘O, I have nothing to worry about; Abraham is my ancestor.’ Your pedigree is no good in the new day coming. This is a day of new beginnings, and either you produce the fruit of your faithfulness or else you are like a dead tree bearing no fruit and good only for burning in the fireplace.”

Well, at least John got their attention. He did not start, “*Gaudete in Domino semper*,” but then, Paul had not written to the Philippians yet. No, in this new day you will need to change your ways. You who have two coats, give one to the person who has none. Share your food, too. Tax collectors and others in public service, be fair; do not use your position for personal gain. You in the military and places of power, protect and do not extort.

A new beginning starts in the heart and manifests itself in action, actions of gentleness that can defeat fear. That is counterintuitive, says Marilynne Robinson; nevertheless, it is the Christian gospel.

Last week our pastor, Tina Lang, met with about 20 other religious leaders in the city at the invitation of Winton Boyd at Orchard Ridge United Church of Christ to decide upon a Christian response to the hate-filled rhetoric directed against Muslims. We all have heard it; we do not need to rehearse it now. It simply has become toxic in our life together.

In our nation’s history this is not the first time such fear-mongering has been popular. There was such vilification of Americans of Japanese descent during World War II that resulted in them being interned in guarded camps to keep “real Americans” safe. The shouting of today brings back the agonizing truth of our nation turning away Jews seeking

asylum from Nazi Germany, sending them back; we were scared to death, so they died. Before our memory but in our history was the fear of Roman Catholics coming from Poland and Ireland who would destroy Protestant America. And in our very DNA as a country there were the enslaved Africans who entrepreneurs brought to our country to perform enforced labor, and when they were set free 150 years ago, a new slavery was fashioned under a Jim Crow shroud that kept the vast majority of them segregated from American life.

Fear of the “imagined other,” to use Robinson’s language, is not new, nor is the need for the power of Christian gentleness to be unleashed in our society new, but it is urgent. Tina will tell us more about her involvement in planning a “Love Over Fear” movement within the congregations of Madison which will produce messages of love and support to the mosques of our city, and offers of protection, too. You will be able to add your signature to those messages after this worship service. There is emerging a shared commitment to assist in resettling refugee families in Madison, a ministry which this congregation has embraced in the past. And we need to study a religion that is not familiar to most of us, maybe in anticipation of Diana Eck’s visit to this congregation in the spring. Dr. Eck is an expert from Harvard University on the religions of the world. That is the kind of proactive gentleness we are called to do, preferably without having to be called “a brood of vipers.” This involvement will be a new beginning for our congregation.

“This Is a Day of New Beginnings” for this congregation; it also is the name of a hymn that we will sing in a few minutes. It is one of my favorites written by a poet whom I have gotten to know, Brian Wren, a Congregationalist originally from Oxford, England, who has spent the last several decades in the United States. I choose many of his hymns for our worship services in part because they are not sentimental; they are tough, realistic. Listen to the opening verse:

This is a day of new beginnings, time to remember and move on,
time to believe what love is bringing, laying to rest the pain that’s gone.

The next verse:

For by the life and death of Jesus, God’s mighty Spirit, now as then,
can make for us a world of difference, as faith and hope are born again.

And, the next:

Then let us, with the Spirit’s daring, step from the past and leave behind
Our disappointment, guilt, and grieving, seeking new paths, and sure to find.

This is a poem of new beginnings for each of us in our individual lives, and in our family lives, and in our public lives, and in our church lives. God is near, even when we cannot see the divine – but look, there in the stable, what is that which we see? What we see there gives us the courage to let go of our fear, along with our pain and disappointment and guilt and grieving. There lies joy that goes far beyond happiness, a gentle reassurance that there is a future.

Christ is alive, and goes before us to show and share what love can do.

This is a day of new beginnings, our God is making all things new.

Yesterday morning twenty-two of us gathered in the chapel upstairs to develop a timeline of this congregation, going back to when we began with a sermon in a barroom over on the Square, soon to establish the first church in Madison. No one present yesterday could remember back that far, but we shared stories about the church library starting in the Christmas pageant costume closet in the 1950’s, on to the 1960’s with the tremendous example of Christian love seen in the Hara family, a Japanese-American family interned during the Second World War, on to the 1970’s with the interfaith work led by Lee Moorehead, the 1980’s with the start of the food pantry and the holiday meals, the 1990’s with the CROP Walk, a trip to Haiti, and the emergence of the Blessed Brass, and into 2000’s with the building project making it clear that we are “Downtown for Good” and making that explicit with our embrace of gender equality initiatives and the offer of extensive care for the homeless.

But the purpose of this retrospective was not loving nostalgia, but rather to ask, “Who have we been that will help us become who God now calls us to be?” What is the future of this congregation? If the scripture tells us that this is a day of new beginnings, then where are we called to go? A lot of the ground work we have been doing this year has been setting the stage for our annual Church Conference next Sunday at 11:15 a.m. and the dawning of a new day of faithfulness.

There is much ministry in our current year that we celebrate and will continue – the expansion of our outreach to the needy in the city center, especially Karen Andro’s hard work on behalf of homeless children, the emergence of the Green Team’s environmental work, the continued commitment to social justice issues, including GLBTQ support, domestic abuse intervention, and cooperation with other efforts – the United Methodist Committee on Relief, the Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice, the YWCA, and Porchlight. How wonderful has been our association with Porchlight’s work with homeless men, dramatically made public by our Director of Music, Scott Foss. The Come as You Are worship on Wednesday mornings, the Senior Socials, the study groups, Vacation Bible School, the high school trip to Americus, Georgia, under the guidance of Seth Schroerlucke, the unglamorous, but essential, work of clarifying our structures and procedures and lay involvement overseen by our administrative staff and Governing Board.

None of that is self-congratulatory. We simply stop and give thanks for what God has done through us, and even, at times, in spite of us. Now what? What is coming in this day of new beginnings? What is God calling us to do, stepping beyond fear in faithful gentleness?

I suggest at least this: God is calling us . . .

- 1) to assess our resources – our people, location, time, money, and imagination, so that we know what are the gifts with which to work;
- 2) to understand our immediate neighborhood, which has changed dramatically over the past 20 years, with a special focus on the young adults living around us, so that we can develop a form of ministry that engages them and all neighbors;
- 3) to survey our families with children to determine how we can nurture them in the faith without depending on assumptions about family life that are obsolete;
- 4) to determine our range of worship, music, and the arts so that we can offer more to more people in more ways;
- 5) to collaborate with the Madison public schools so that we can be involved in addressing the inequities in the system that are defined by race;
- 6) to participate in genuine interfaith work;
- 7) to anchor all of our doing good in downtown Madison in an authentic Christian spirituality.

No doubt, there will be more. This is a day of new beginnings. Let us not fear where God will lead us. Amen.